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Riha: The spy who never was?

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DENVER — It has been more than seven years now since Thomas Riha had a quiet dinner at the home of friends, said his good-bys, drove off alone in the darkness — and vanished.

Riha, an associate professor of Russian history at the University of Colorado in nearby Boulder, had confided a week earlier that he thought he was being followed, adding mysteriously that the life of a government agent is "10 years at best."

Was he a government agent? A double agent? Is he dead? Or is he alive in Eastern Europe.

All of these questions were raised again here in the last few weeks as a result of an effort by Riha's nephew, Zdened Cerveny, to have his uncle declared legally dead. The effort has produced a suit against the CIA and has resurrected again the bizarre circumstances surrounding Riha's disappearance.

As pieced together through interviews, court records and newspaper clippings, the Riha story unfolds like a James Bond thriller — with hints of foreign intrigue involving the CIA, the FBI, a suicide, cyanide poisonings, forgery and the intervention of a U. S. senator.

Although the CIA has admitted it

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once had a "general counterintelligence interest" in Riha, the agency has consistently denied he was ever used as an agent. The FBI also has denied he ever was in its employ.

A native of Czechoslovakia, Riha came to the United States when he was 17, was granted U. S. citizenship, pursued his education and made his way to Boulder to teach Russian history. When he disappeared, he was 40.

That was March 15, 1969, and since that time the only trace of him was his wedding ring, discovered shortly after he vanished, in the home of a local plastics manufacturer who three months later died of potassium cyanide poisoning.

The last person reported to have seen Riha was Galva Tannenbaum, an ex-convict who reportedly had convinced the professor she was an officer in U. S. military intelligence who could help him get his nephew, Cerveny, into the United States.

Riha and Mrs. Tannenbaum apparently met in late 1968. Cerveny was in Vienna at the time, having fled Prague after the Soviet Union occupied Czechoslovakia. In late 1968 he was admitted to the United States.

Then, early in 1970, Mrs. Tannenbaum was charged with forgery in connection with Riha's signature on a check and other documents. She also was charged with forging a name on the will of another friend, the plastics manufacturer who died of cyanide poisoning.

But she was declared legally insane after a hearing in Boulder District Court and committed to the Colorado State Hospital in Pueblo, where eight months later she committed suicide by swallowing cyanide.

Before she died, hospital authorities said she uttered a profane farewell:

"I didn't kill him (Riha). That son of a bitch — he's in Russia. He just made it."

Cerveny's attorney, Martin Buckley, said his theory of the case is that Mrs. Tannenbaum did kill Riha. "But I have no evidence of that," he said. Cerveny said he was convinced that she was working for the FBI or the CIA. Both agencies have denied any involvement with her.

A colleague of Riha at the university said the Denver office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service had told him that Riha was alive. Four months later, however, the office, asked again about Riha, said it was "better not to be interested in the Riha matter."

Then, at the request of the Denver Post, Sen. Gary Hart (D., Colo.) brought up the question of Riha's disappearance last year as the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was questioning the CIA's former chief of counterintelligence, James J. Angleton, and an former director of the FBI's intelligence division, Charles Brennan.

On the basis of information received by the Senate committee, Hart concluded that "Riha is, most probably, living somewhere today in Eastern Europe, possibly Czechoslovakia . . . Why he left the U. S. remains unclear. Personal reasons were probably the basis for his decision to leave."